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## Reagan's Personal Victory vs. the Political Reality

**W**hat did the newly reelected Ronald Reagan mean when, standing before his cheering loyalists in a ballroom of balloons and flags, he said that "tonight is the end of nothing. It is the beginning of everything. America's best days lie ahead."

Was he renouncing his Armageddon beliefs? Or was he crowning himself the secular messiah, promising, in the second coming of Reagan, prompt delivery of the future's best days?

It could be that the words mean nothing at all. The country has become accustomed to meaningless remarks from Reagan, and as the election suggests, likes them and wants more.

Taken literally, the statement is frightening. What Reagan has tried to do in the country in the past four years was nothing? There are to be more victims among the poor, more support of dictators like Marcos, more weapons programs, more attempts to weaken environmental, consumer, health and safety laws, more minings of harbors in Nicaragua, more Anne Burfords, more tax benefits to people with incomes over \$200,000?

All of that could happen. Four years ago, only the naive were putting anything past Reagan. The question now is what kind of effort will be needed to prevent the dawning of Reagan's planned "best days."

Some hope—a lot of it—can be found in the election returns, once the Reagan personality vote is put aside. The land that was sliding the president to his victory was suffering considerable soil erosion further back in Senate and House races. In many state races

and local initiatives, the results argue against the Republicans' headiness that their mandate is overwhelming. According to Citizens Action, a coalition of 20 statewide progressive political organizations, the number of pro-Reagan people in the Senate and House is smaller than in 1980.

The Senate has four new members from the Democratic left: Tom Harkin, Paul Simon, Albert Gore and John Kerry. Harkin of Iowa and Simon of Illinois are much more than mere anti-Reagan moles. Both have House records of supporting humane, progressive legislation. Harkin was one of the first in the House to warn that nothing would be gained in Central America by sending weapons and

CIA advisers. Harkin was influenced in his thinking by his friendship with Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran church leader martyred in 1980.

Harkin's victory in Iowa means also a defeat for oversimplified positions on abortion. He campaigned as one who is morally opposed to abortion but believes there are more effective ways to end the destructiveness than by constitutional amendments or funding restrictions against the poor. A year ago, Harkin, who devours books, took time out to read deeply into the current literature on abortion. In two of Iowa's most Catholic counties—Carroll and Dubuque—where voters in the past have been hard on so-called pro-choice candidates, Harkin won with 63 and 59 percent of the vote. He was respected for thinking his way to his position, not shouting his way.

In Illinois, Paul Simon replaces Charles Percy, who replaced Paul Douglas in 1966. Simon is much like the late Douglas: a truly kindhearted man at ease with idealism while being careful about coming on too judgmentally against opponents. Simon, a former newspaper editor and a writer of several worthy books, backed a statewide referendum on a rollback of natural gas prices. It carried 7 to 1. As much as anything, this was a rejection of the Reagan policies that had allowed gas prices to soar.

In the House, no wipeout of progressives occurred. In Illinois, Lane Evans, one of the sharpest Reagan opponents in the House and from a predominantly Republican district, won with 56 percent of the vote. Reps. Phil Sharp (Ind.), Bob Edgar (Pa.), Peter Kostmayer (Pa.), Bruce Morrison (Conn.), Robert Mrazek (N.Y.), Bob Carr (Mich.) and Marcy Kaptur (Ohio) were said to be in danger of losing. All are progressives. All had consistently opposed Reagan's policies. All won.

During his campaign, Reagan offered no specific plans or programs for the next four years. His victory followed an established pattern: Voters don't throw out an incumbent when the economy seems strong. An upturn has occurred, but what is supposed to follow a recession?

Walter Mondale bet that he could win by unnerving the public about a dark future under Reagan. That didn't work, and didn't deserve to.

With more Democrats in the Senate and a less weakened than expected Democratic House, Reagan won a personal victory, not a political one. When he says "it is the beginning of everything," he was probably referring to himself.